RED OLEANDERS

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT

BY

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The Curtain rises on a window covered by a network of intricate pattern in front of the Palace.

(Nandini and Kishôr, a digger boy, come in.)

Kishôr

Have you enough flowers, Nandini? Here, I have brought some more.

Nandini

Run away, Kishôr, do,—back to your work, quick! You'll be late again.

Kishôr

I must steal some time from my digging and digging of nuggets to bring out flowers to you.

Nandini

But they'll punish you, my boy, if they know.

Kishôr

You said you *must* have red oleanders. I am glad they're hard to find in this place. Only one tree I discovered after days of search, nearly hidden away behind a rubbish heap.

Nandini

Show it me. I'll go and gather the flowers myself.

Kishôr

Don't be cruel, Nandini. This tree is my one secret which none shall

know. I've always envied Bishu, he can sing to you songs that are his own. From now I shall have flowers which you'll have to take only from my hands.

Nandini

But it breaks my heart to know that those brutes punish you.

Kishôr

It makes these flowers all the more preciously mine. They come from my pain.

Nandini

It pains me to accept anything which brings you hurt.

Kishôr

I dream of dying one day for your sake, Nandini.

Nandini

Is there nothing I can give you in return ?

Kishôr

Promise that you will accept flowers only from me every morning.

Nandini

I will. But do be careful.

Kishôr

No, no, I shall be rash and defy their blows. My homage shall be my daily triumph.

[*Goes.*

(*Professor comes in.*)

Professor

Nandini!

Nandini

Yes, Professor!

Professor

Why do you come and startle one, now and again, and then pass by?

Since you awaken a cry in our hearts, what harm if you stop a moment in answer to it? Let us talk a little.

Nandini

What need have you of me?

Professor

If you talk of need, look over there! —You'll see our tunnel-diggers creeping out of the holes like worms, with loads of things of need. In this Yaksha Town all our treasure is of gold, the secret treasure of the dust. But the gold which is you, beautiful one, is not of the dust, but of the light which never owns any bond.

Nandini

Over and over again you say this to me. What makes you wonder at me so, Professor?

Professor

The sunlight gleaming through the forest thickets surprises nobody, but the light that breaks through a cracked wall is quite a different thing. In Yaksha Town, you are this light that startles. Tell me, what d'you think of this place?

Nandini

It puzzles me to see a whole city thrusting its head underground, groping with both hands in the dark. You dig tunnels in the underworld and come out with dead wealth that the earth has kept buried for ages past.

Professor

The *Jinn* of that dead wealth we invoke. If we can enslave him the whole world lies at our feet.

Nandini

Then again, you hide your king behind a wall of netting. Is it for fear of people finding out that he's a man ?

Professor

As the ghost of our dead wealth is fearfully potent so is our ghostly royalty, made hazy by this net, with its inhuman power to frighten people.

Nandini

All you say is a kind of made-up talk.

Professor

Of course made-up. The naked is without a credential, it's the made-up clothes that define us. It delights me immensely to discuss philosophy with you.

Nandini

That's strange! You who burrow day and night in a mass of yellow pages, like your diggers in the bowels of the earth,—why waste your time on me?

Professor

The privilege of wasting time proves one's wealth of time. We poor drudges are insects in a hole in this solid toil, you are the evening star in the rich sky of leisure. When we see you, our wings grow restless. Come to my room. For a moment allow me to be reckless in my waste of time.

Nandini

No, not now. I have come to see your king, in *his* room.

Professor

How can you enter through the screen?

Nandini

I shall find my way through the net-work.

Professor

Do you know, Nandini, I too live behind a net-work of scholarship. I am an unmitigated scholar, just as our king is an unmitigated king.

Nandini

You are laughing at me, Professor. But tell me, when they brought me here, why didn't they bring my Rañjan also ?

Professor

It's their way to snatch things by fractions. But why should you want to drag your life's treasure down amongst this dead wealth of ours ?

Nandini

Because I know he can put a beating heart behind these dead ribs.

Professor

Your own presence is puzzling enough for our governors here; if Rañjan also comes they will be in despair.

Nandini

They do not know how comic they are,—Rañjan will bring God's own laughter in their midst and startle them into life.

Professor

Divine laughter is the sunlight that melts ice, but not stones. Only the pressure of gross muscle can move our governors.

Nandini

My Rañjan's strength is like that of your river, Sankhini,—it can laugh and yet it can break. Let me tell you a little secret news of mine. I shall meet Rañjan to-day.

Professor

Who told you that?

Nandini

Yes, yes, we shall meet. The news has come.

Professor

Through what way could news come and yet evade the Governor?

Nandini

Through the same way that brings news of the coming Spring.

Professor

You mean it's in the air,—like the rumours which flush in the colour of the sky, or flutter in the dance of the wind?

Nandini

I won't say more now. When Rañjan comes you'll see for yourself

how rumours in the air come down on earth.

Professor

Once she begins to talk of Rañjan there's no stopping Nandini's mouth! Well, well, I have my books, let me take my shelter behind them,—I dare not go on with this.

(*Coming back after going a little way.*)

Nandini, let me ask you one thing. Aren't you frightened of our Yaksha Town?

Nandini

Why should I feel afraid?

Professor

All creatures fear an eclipse, not the full sun. Yaksha Town is a city under eclipse. The Shadow Demon, who lives in the gold caves, has eaten into it. It is not whole itself, neither does it allow any one else to remain whole.

Listen to me, don't stay here. When you go, these pits will yawn all the wider for us, I know,—yet I say to you, fly; go and live happily with Rañjan where people in their drunken fury don't tear the earth's veil to pieces.

(*Going a little way and then coming back.*)

Nandini, will you give me a flower from your chain of red oleanders?

Nandini

Why, what will you do with it?

Professor

How often have I thought that there is some omen in these ornaments of yours.

Nandini

I don't know of any.

Professor

Perhaps your fate knows. In that red there is not only beauty, but also the fascination of fear.

Nandini

Fear! Even in me?

Professor

I don't know what event you have come to write with that crimson tint. There was the gardenia and the tuberose, there was white jasmine,—why did you leave them all and choose this flower? Do you know, we often choose our own fate thus, without knowing it!

Nandini

Rañjan sometimes calls me Red Oleander. I feel that the colour of his love is red,—that red I wear on my neck, on my breast, on my arms.

Professor

Well, just give me one of those flowers,—a moment's gift,—let me try to understand the meaning of its colour.

Nandini

Here, take it. Rañjan is coming to-day,—out of my heart's delight I give it to you.

[*Professor goes.*

(*Gôkul, a digger, comes in.*)

Gôkul

Turn this way, woman! Who are you? I've never yet been able to understand you.

Nandini

I'm nothing more than what you see. What need have you to understand me?

Gôkul

I don't trust what I can't understand. For what purpose has the King brought you here?

Nandini

Because I serve no purpose of his.

Gôkul

You know some spell, I'm sure. You're snaring everybody here. You're a witch! Those who are bewitched by your beauty will come to their death.

Nandini

That death will not be yours, Gôkul, never fear! You'll die digging.

Gôkul

Let me see, let me see, what's that dangling over your forehead?

Nandini

Only a tassel of red oleanders.

Gôkul

What does it mean ?

Nandini

It has no meaning at all.

Gôkul

I don't believe you, one bit ! You're up to some trickery. Some evil will befall us before the day is out. That's why you have got yourself up like this. Oh you terrible, terrible witch !

Nandini

What makes you think me so terrible ?

Gôkul

You're looking like an ominous torch

with a red flame. Let me go and warn these fools.—Beware! Beware!

[*He goes.*

Nandini (knocking at the net-work)

Do you hear me?

A voice (from behind the scenes)

I hear you. But don't call me,—I have no time.

Nandini

Let me come inside. My heart is full to-day.

Voice

No, not into my room.

Nandini

I have brought you a garland of white *kunda* flowers.

Voice

Wear it yourself.

Nandini

My own garland is of red oleanders.

Voice

I am like a mountain peak, my bareness is my adornment.

Nandini

Like waterfalls running down the peak, this white flower-chain will sway on your breast. Open the netting, I want to come in.

Voice

I can't allow it. There's no time.

Nandini

Don't you hear that song in the distance?

Voice

What are they singing?

Nandini

The autumn song:

Hark, 'tis Autumn calling:
"Come, O, come away!"—
Her basket is heaped with corn.

Don't you see the September sun is spreading the glow of the ripening corn in the air?

Drunken with the perfumed wine of wind,
the sky seems to sway among the shivering corn,
its sunlight trailing on the fields

You too come out, King!—out into the fields.

Voice

Fields! What could I do there?

Nandini

The work there is much simpler than your work in Yaksha Town.

Voice

It's the simple which is impossible for me. A lake cannot run out dancing, like a frolicsome waterfall. Leave me now, I have no time.

Nandini

The day you let me into your storehouse the blocks of gold did not surprise me,—what amazed me was the immense strength with which you lifted and arranged them. But can blocks of gold ever answer to the swinging rhythm of your arms in the same way as fields of corn? Are you not afraid, King, of handling the dead wealth of the earth?

Voice

What is there to fear?

Nandini

The living heart of the earth gives

itself up in love and life and beauty, but when you rend its bosom and disturb the dead, you bring up with your booty the curse of its dark demon, blind and hard, cruel and envious. Don't you see everybody here is either angry, or suspicious, or afraid?

Voice

Curse?

Nandini

Yes, the curse of grabbing and killing.

Voice

But we bring up strength. Does not my strength please you, Nandini?

Nandini

Indeed it does. Therefore I ask you, come out into the light, step on the ground, let the earth be glad.

Voice

Do you know, Nandini, you too are half-hidden behind an evasion,—you mystery of beauty! I want to pluck you out of it, to grasp you within my closed fist, to handle you, scrutinise you,—or else to break you to pieces.

Nandini

Whatever do you mean?

Voice

Why can't I strain out the tint of your oleanders and build a dream out of it to keep before my eyes? Those few frail petals guard it and hinder me. Within you there is the same hindrance, so strong because so soft. Nandini, will you tell me what you think of me?

Nandini

Not now, you have no time. Let me go.

Voice

No, no, don't go. Do tell me what you think of me.

Nandini

Have I not told you often enough? I think you are wonderful. Strength swelling up in your arms, like rolling clouds before a storm,—it makes my heart dance within me.

Voice

And when your heart dances to see Rañjan, is that also——

Nandini

Let that be,—you have no time.

Voice

There *is* time,—for this; only tell me, then go.

Nandini

That dance rhythm is different, you won't understand.

Voice

I will, I *must* understand.

Nandini

I can't explain it clearly. Let me go.

Voice

Tell me, at least, whether you like me.

Nandini

Yes, I like you.

Voice

The same as Rañjan?

Nandini

Again the same question! I tell you, you don't understand these things.

Voice

I *do* understand, a little. I know what the difference is between Rañjan and me. In me there is only strength, in Rañjan there is magic.

Nandini

What d'you mean by magic?

Voice

Shall I explain? Underground there are blocks of stone, iron, gold,—there you have the image of strength. On the surface grows the grass, the flower blossoms,—there you have the play of magic. I can extract gold from the fearsome depths of secrecy, but to

wrest that magic from the near at hand I fail.

Nandini

You have no end of things, yet why always covet ?

Voice

All I possess is so much dead weight. No increase of gold can create a particle of a touchstone, no increase of power can ever come up to youth. I can only guard by force. If I had Rañjan's youth I could leave you free and yet hold you fast. My time is spent in knotting the binding rope, but, alas, everything else can be kept tied, except joy.

Nandini

It is you who entangle yourself in your own net, then why keep on fretting ?

Voice

You will never understand. I, who am a desert, stretch out my hand to you, a tiny blade of grass, and cry: I am parched, I am bare, I am weary. The flaming thirst of this desert licks up one fertile field after another, only to enlarge itself,—it can never annex the life of the frailest of grasses.

Nandini

One would never think you were so tired.

Voice

One day, Nandini, in a far off land, I saw a mountain as weary as myself. I could not guess that all its stones were aching inwardly. One night I heard a noise, as if some giant's evil dream had moaned and moaned and suddenly snapped asunder. Next morning I found the mountain had

disappeared in the chasm of a yawning earthquake. That made me understand how overgrown power crushes itself inwardly by its own weight. I see in you something quite opposite.

Nandini

What is it you see in me?

Voice

The dance rhythm of the All.

Nandini

I don't understand.

Voice

The rhythm that lightens the enormous weight of matter. To that rhythm the bands of stars and planets go about dancing from sky to sky, like so many minstrel boys. It is that rhythm, Nandini, that makes you

so simple, so perfect. How small you are compared to me, yet I envy you.

Nandini

You have cut yourself off from everybody and so deprived yourself.

Voice

I keep myself apart, that it may become easy for me to plunder the world's big treasure-houses. Nevertheless there are gifts that your little flower-like fingers can easily reach, but not all the strength of my body,—gifts hidden in God's closed hand. That hand I must force open some day.

Nandini

When you talk like that, I don't follow you. Let me go.

Voice

Go then; but here, I stretch out

this hand of mine from my window, place your hand on it for a moment.

Nandini

Only a hand, and the rest of you hidden? It frightens me!

Voice

Everybody flies from me because they only see my hand.

But if I wished to hold you with all of me, would you come to me, Nandini?

Nandini

Why talk like this when you wouldn't even let me come into your room?

Voice

My busy time, overloaded with work, dragged along against obstruction, is not for you. On the day when you can arrive, full sail before the wind, into the bosom of my full

leisure, the hour of welcome will strike. Even if that wind be a storm, all will be well. That hour is not yet come.

Nandini

Rañjan will bring that delightful wind here, I tell you. He carries his holiday-time with him, even in his work.

Voice

He has the red wine of oleanders to fill up his cup. But to me you want to pass on an empty leisure. Where is the wine?

Nandini

Let me go now.

Voice

Answer me first.

Nandini

How to fulfil leisure you will learn from Rañjan. He is so beautiful.

Voice

Beauty only responds to beauty, Its lute strings break when force tries to snatch an answer. But no more of this. Go, go away, or else there will be trouble.

Nandini

I go. But I tell you, my Rañjan is coming to-day. You cannot prevent him.

[*She goes.*

(*Phágulal, the digger, and his wife Chandrá, come in.*)

Phágulal

My bottle, Chandrá? Out with it!

Chandrá

What! Drink from early morning?

Phágulal

Isn't it our holiday? Yesterday was the fast day of the War Goddess. To-day they worship the Flag.

Chandrá

Must you drink just because it's a holiday? In our village home, on feast days, you never——

Phágulal

Freedom itself was enough for the holidays in our village. The caged bird spends its holiday knocking against the bars. In Yaksha Town holidays are more of a nuisance than work.

Chandrá

Let's go back home, then.

Phágulal

The road to our home is closed for ever.

Chandrá

How's that?

Phágulal

Our homes don't yield them any profit.

Chandrá

But are we closely fitted to their profits only,—like husks to grains of corn,—with nothing of us left over?

Phágulal

Our mad Bishu says: to remain whole is useful only for the lamb itself; those who eat it prefer to leave out its horns and hooves, and even object to its bleating when butchered. There's the madcap, singing as he goes.

Chandrá

It's only the last few days that his songs have burst forth.

Phágulal

That's true.

Chandrá

He's been possessed by Nandini. She draws his heart and his songs too.

Phágulal

No wonder.

Chandrá

Indeed! You'd better be careful. She'll next be bringing out songs from *your* throat,—which would be rough on our neighbours. The witch is up to all kinds of tricks, and is sure to bring misfortune.

Phágulal

Bishu's misfortune is nothing recent, he knew Nandini long before coming here.

Chandrá

(*Calling out*) I say, Bishu, come this way. Maybe you'll find somebody here also to listen to your singing,—it won't be altogether thrown away.

(*Bishu comes in, singing.*)

Bishu (*sings*)

Boatman of my dreams,
The sail is filled with a boisterous breeze
and my mad heart sings
to the lilt of the rocking of thy boat,
at the call of the far away landing.

Chandrá

I know who the boatman of your dreams is.

Bishu

How should you know from outside? You haven't seen from inside my boat.

Chandrá

Your boat is going to get wrecked one of these days, let me tell you,—by that pet Nandini of yours.

(*Gôkul, the digger, comes in.*)

Gôkul

I say, Bishu, I don't quite trust your Nandini.

Bishu

Why, what has she done?

Gôkul

She does nothing, that's the rub. I don't understand the way she goes on.

Chandrá

To see her flaunting her prettiness all over the place makes me sick.

Gôkul

We can trust features that are plain enough to understand.

Bishu

I know the atmosphere of this place breeds contempt for beauty. There must be beauty even in hell; but nobody there can understand it, that's their cruellest punishment.

Chandrá

Maybe we are fools, but even our Governor here can't stand her—d'you know that?

Bishu

Take care, Chandrá, lest you catch the infection of our Governor's eyes—then perhaps yours too will redden at the sight of us. What say you, Phágulal?

Phágulal

To tell you the truth, brother, when I see Nandini, I feel ashamed to think of myself. I can't utter a word when she's there.

Gôkul

The day will come when you'll know her to your cost,—perhaps too late.

[*Goes.*

Phágulal

Bishu, your friend Chandrá wants to know why we drink.

Bishu

God in his mercy has everywhere provided a liberal allowance of drink. We men with our arms supply the output of our muscles, you women with yours supply the wine of embraces. In this world there is hunger to force us to work; but there's also the green of the woods, the gold of the sunshine, to make us drunk with their holiday-call.

Chandrá

You call these things *drink*?

Bishu

Yes, drinks of life, an endless stream of intoxication. Take my case. I come to this place; I am set to work burgling the underworld; for me nature's own ration of spirits is stopped; so my inner man craves the artificial wine of the market place.

(*Sings*)

My life, your sap has run dry,
Fill then the cup with the wine of death,
That flushes all emptiness with its laughter.

Chandrá

Come, brother, let us fly from here.

Bishu

To that boundless tavern, underneath the blue canopy? Alas, the road is closed, and we seek consolation in the stolen wine of the prison house.

No open sky, no leisure for us; so we have distilled the essence of all the song and laughter, all the sunlight of the twelve hours' day into one draught of liquid fire.

(*Sings*)

Thy sun is hidden amid a mass of
murky cloud.
Thy day has smudged itself black in
dusty toil.
Then let the dark night descend
the last comrade of drunken oblivion.
Let it cover thy tired eyes with the mist
that will help thee desperately to
lose thyself.

Chandrá

Well, well, Bishu, you men have gone to the dogs in Yaksha Town, if you like, but we women haven't changed at all.

Bishu

Haven't you? Your flowers have

faded, and you are all slavering for gold.

Chandrá

No, never!

Bishu

I say, yes. That Phágulal toils for hours over and above the twelve,—why? For a reason unknown to him, unknown even to you. But *I* know. It's your dream of gold that lashes him on to work, more severely than the foreman's whip.

Chandrá

Very well. Then why don't we fly from here, and go back home?

Bishu

Your Governor has closed the way as well as the will to return. If you go there to-day you will fly back here to-morrow, like a caged bird to its cage, hankering for its drugged food.

Phágulal

I say, Bishu, once upon a time you came very near spoiling your eyesight poring over books; how is it they made you ply the spade along with the rest of us stupid boors?

Chandrá

All this time we've been here, we haven't got from Bishu the answer to this particular question.

Phágulal

Yet we all know it.

Bishu

Well, out with it then!

Phágulal

They employed you to spy on us.

Bishu

If you knew that, how is it you let me off alive?

Phágulal

But, we knew also, that game was not in your line.

Chandrá

How is it you couldn't stick to such a comfortable job, brother?

Bishu

Comfortable job? To stick to a living being like a carbuncle on his back?

I said: "I must go home, my health is failing."

"Poor thing," said the Governor, "how can you go home in such a state? However, there's no harm in your trying."

Well, I did try. And then I found that, as soon as one enters the maw of Yaksha Town, its jaws shut

fast, and the one road that remains open leads withinwards. Now I am swamped in that interior without hope and without light, and the only difference between you and me is, that the Governor looks down upon me even worse than upon you. Man despises the broken pot of his own creation more than the withered leaf fallen from the tree.

Phágulal

What does that matter, Bishu? You have risen high in our esteem.

Bishu

Discovery only means death. Where your favour falls there falls the Governor's glance. The more noisily the yellow frogs welcome the black toad, the sooner their croaking points him out to the boa-constrictor.

Chandrá

But when will your work be finished ?

Bishu

The calendar never records the last day. After the first day comes the second, after the second the third. There's no such thing as getting finished here. We're always digging —one yard, two yards, three yards. We go on raising gold nuggets,—after one nugget another, then more and more and more. In Yaksha Town figures follow one another in rows and never arrive at any conclusion. That's why we are not men to them, but only numbers.—Phágu, what's yours ?

Phágulal

I'm No. 47 V.

Bishu

I'm 69 Ng.

Chandrá

Brother, they've hoarded such heaps of gold, can't they stop digging now ?

Bishu

There's always an end to things of need, no doubt; so we stop when we've had enough to eat. But we don't need drunkenness, therefore there's no end to it. These nuggets are the drink—the solid drink—of our Gold King. Don't you see ?

Chandrá

No, I don't.

Bishu

Cups in hand, we forget that we are chained to our limits. Gold blocks in hand, our master fancies he's freed from the gravitation of the commonplace, and is soaring in the rarest of upper heights.

Chandrá

In this season the villages are preparing for their harvest festival. Let's go home.

Phágulal

Don't worry me, Chándrá. A thousand times over have I told you that in these parts there are high roads to the market, to the burning ground, to the scaffold,—everywhere except to the homeland.

Chandrá

If we were to go to the Governor, and just tell him——

Bishu

Hasn't your woman's wit seen through the Governor yet?

Chandrá

Why, he seems to be so nice and——

Bishu

Yes, nice and polished, like the crocodile's teeth, which fit into one another with so thorough a bite that the King himself can't unlock the jaw, even if he wants to.

Chandrá

There comes the Governor.

Bishu

Then it's all up with us. He's sure to have overheard——

Chandrá

Why, we haven't said anything so very——

Bishu

Sister, we can only say the words,—they put in the meaning.

(*The Governor comes in.*)

Chandrá

Sir Governor!

Governor

Well, my child?

Chandrá

Grant us leave to go home for a little.

Governor

Why, aren't the rooms we have given you excellent, much better than the ones at home? We have even kept a state watchman for your safety.

Hullo, 69 Ng, to see you amongst these people reminds one of a heron come to teach paddy birds how to cut capers.

Bishu

Sir, your jesting does not reassure me. Had my feet the strength to make others dance, would I not have

run away from here, first thing? Especially after the striking examples I've seen of the fate that overtakes dancing masters in this country. As things are, one's legs tremble even to walk straight.

Chandrá

Give us leave, Sir Governor, do give us leave. Let us go just for once, and see our waving fields of barleycorn in the ear, and the ample shade of our banian tree with its hanging roots. I cannot tell you how our hearts ache. Don't you see that your men here work all day in the dark, and in the evening steep themselves in the denser dark of drunkenness? Have you no pity for them?

Governor

My dear child, surely you know of our constant anxiety for their welfare. That is exactly why I have sent for

our High Preacher, Kenarám Gosain himself, to give moral talks to the men. Their votive fees will pay for his upkeep. Every evening the Gosain will come and——

Phágulal

That won't do, sir! Now, at worst, we get drunk of an evening, but if we are preached to every night, there'll be manslaughter!

Bishu

Hush, hush, Phágulai.

(*Preacher Gosain comes in.*)

Governor

Talk of the Preacher and he appears. Your Holiness, I do you reverence. These workmen of ours sometimes feel disturbed in their weak minds. Deign to whisper in their ears some texts of peace. The need is urgent.

Gosain

These people? Are they not the very incarnation of the sacred Tortoise of our scripture, that held up the sinking earth on its back? Because they meekly suppress themselves underneath their burden, the upper world can keep its head aloft. The very thought sends a thrill through my body!

Just think of it, friend 47 V, yours is the duty of supplying food to this mouth which chants the holy name. With the sweat of your brow have you woven this wrap printed with the holy name, which exalts this devoted body. Surely that is no mean privilege. May you remain for ever undisturbed, is my benediction, for then the grace of God will abide with you likewise.

My friends, repeat aloud the holy

name of Hari, and all your burdens will be lightened. The name of Hari shall be taken in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end,—so say the scriptures.

Chandrá

How sweet! It's long since I have heard such words! Give, oh give me a little dust off your feet!

Phágulal

Stop this waste of money, Governor. If it's our offerings you want, we can stand it, but we're fairly sick of this cant.

Bishu

Once Phágulal runs amok it's all over with the lot of you. Hush, hush, Phágulal!

Chandrá

Are you bent on spoiling your

chances both in this world and the next, you wretched man? You were never like this before. Nandini's ill wind has blown upon you,—and no mistake.

Gosain

What charming naïveté, Sir Governor! What's in their heart is always on their lips. What can we teach them?—it's they who'll teach us a lesson. You know what I mean.

Governor

I know where the root of the trouble is. I'll have to take them in hand myself, I see. Meanwhile, pray go to the next parish and chant them the holy name,—the sawyers there have taken to grumbling, somewhat.

Gosain

Which parish did you say?

Governor

Parish T-D. No. 71 T is headman there. It ends to the left of where No. 65 of Row M lives.

Gosain

My son, though Parish T-D may not yet be quieted, the whole Row of M's have lately become steeped in a beautiful spirit of meekness. Still it is better to keep an extra police force posted in the parish some time longer. Because, as you know our scripture says,—pride is our greatest foe. After the strength of the police has helped to conquer pride, then comes our turn. I take my leave.

Chandrá

Forgive these men, Your Holiness, and give them your blessing, that they may follow the right path.

Gosain

Fear not, good woman, they'll all end thoroughly pacified.

[*The Gosain goes.*

Governor

I say, 69 Ng, the temper of your parish seems to be somewhat strained.

Bishu

That's nothing strange. The Gosain called them the incarnation of the Tortoise. But, according to scripture, incarnations change; and, when the Tortoise gave place to the Boar, in place of hard shell came out aggressive teeth, so that all-suffering patience was transformed into defiant obstinacy.

Chandrá

But, Sir Governor, don't forget my request.

Governor

I have heard it and will bear it in mind.

[*He goes.*

Chandrá

Ah now, didn't you see how nice the Governor is? How he smiles every time he talks!

Bishu

Crocodile's teeth begin by smiling and end by biting.

Chandrá

Where does his bite come in?

Bishu

Don't you know he's going to make it a rule not to let the workmen's wives accompany them here.

Chandrá

Why?

Bishu

We have a place in their account book as numbers, but women's figures do not mate with figures of arithmetic.

Chandrá

O dear! but have they no women-folk of their own?

Bishu

Their ladies are besotted with the wine of gold, even worse than their husbands.

Chandrá

Bishu, you had a wife at home,—what's become of her?

Bishu

So long as I filled the honoured post of spy, they used to invite her to those big mansions to play cards with their ladies. Ever since I joined Phágulal's

set, all that was stopped, and she left me in a huff at the humiliation.

Chandrá

For shame! But look, brother Bishu, what a grand procession! One palanquin after another! Don't you see the sparkle of the jewelled fringes of the elephant-seats? How beautiful the out-riders on horseback look, as if they had bits of sunlight pinned on the points of their spears!

Bishu

Those are the Governor's and Deputy Governor's ladies, going to the Flag-worship.

Chandrá

Bless my soul, what a gorgeous array and how fine they look!

I say, Bishu, if you hadn't given up that job, would you have gone

along with that set in this grand style ? — and that wife of yours, surely——

Bishu

Yes, we too should have come to just such a pass.

Chandrá

Is there no way going back,—none whatever ?

Bishu

There is,—through the gutter.

A distant voice

Bishu, my mad one!

Bishu

Yes, my mad girl!

Phágulal

There's Nandini. There'll be no more of Bishu for us, for the rest of the day.

Chandrá

Tell me, Bishu, what does she charm you with?

Bishu

The charm of sorrow.

Chandrá

Why do you talk so topsy-turvy?

Bishu

She reminds me that there are sorrows, to forget which is the greatest of sorrow.

Phágulal

Please to speak plainly, Bishu, otherwise it becomes positively annoying!

Bishu

The pain of desire for the near belongs to the animal, the sorrow of aspiration for the far belongs to man.

That far away flame of my eternal sorrow is revealed through Nandini.

Chandrá

Brother, we don't understand these things. But one thing I do understand and that is,—the less you men can make out a girl, the more she attracts you! We simple women,—our price is not so high, but we at least keep you on the straight path. I warn you, once for all, that girl with her noose of red oleanders will drag you to perdition.

[*Chandrá and Phágulal go.*

(*Nandini comes in.*)

Nandini

My mad one, did you hear their autumn songs this morning?

Bishu

Is my morning like yours that I should hear singing? Mine is only a swept-away remnant of the weary night.

Nandini

In my gladness of heart I thought I'd stand on the rampart and join in their song. But the guards would not let me, so I've come to you.

Bishu

I am not a rampart.

Nandini

You are *my* rampart. When I come to you I seem to climb high, I find the open light.

Bishu

Ever since coming to Yaksha Town the sky has dropped out of my life.

I felt as if they had pounded me in the same mortar with all the fractions of men here, and rolled us into a solid lump.

Then you came and looked into my face in a way that made me sure some light could still be seen through me.

Nandini

In this closed fort a bit of sky survives only between you and me, my mad one.

Bishu

Through that sky my songs can fly towards you.

(*Sings*)

You keep me awake that I may sing to you,
O Breaker of my sleep!
And so my heart you startle with your call,
O Waker of my grief!

The shades of evening fall,
the birds come to their nest.
The boat arrives ashore,
yet my heart knows no rest,
O Waker of my grief!

Nandini

The waker of your grief, Bishu?

Bishu

Yes, you are my messenger from the unreachable shore. The day you came to Yaksha Town a gust of salt air knocked at my heart.

Nandini

But I never had any message of this sorrow of which you sing.

Bishu

Not even from Rañjan?

Nandini

No, he holds an oar in each hand and ferries me across the stormy

waters; he catches wild horses by the mane and rides with me through the woods; he shoots an arrow between the eyebrows of the tiger on the spring, and scatters my fear with loud laughter. As he jumps into our Nagai river and disturbs its current with his joyous splashing, so he disturbs me with his tumultuous life. Desperately he stakes his all on the game and thus has he won me.

You also were there with us, but you held aloof, and at last something urged you one day to leave our gambling set. At the time of your parting you looked at my face in a way I could not quite make out. After that I've had no news of you for long. Tell me where you went off to then.

Bishu

My boat was tied to the bank; the

rope snapped; the wild wind drove it into the trackless unknown.

Nandini

But who dragged you back from there to dig for nuggets here in Yaksha Town?

Bishu

A woman. Just as a bird on the wing is brought to the ground by a chance arrow, so did she bring me down to the dust. I forgot myself.

Nandini

How could she touch you?

Bishu

When the thirsty heart despairs of finding water it's easy enough for it to be deluded by a mirage, and driven in barren quest from desert to desert.

One day, while I was gazing at the

sunset clouds, she had her eye upon the golden spire of the Governor's palace. Her glance challenged me to take her over there. In my foolish pride I vowed to do so. When I did bring her here, under the golden spire, the spell was broken.

Nandini

I've come to take you away from here.

Bishu

Since you have moved even the king of this place, what power on earth can prevent you? Tell me, don't you feel afraid of him?

Nandini

I did fear him from outside that screen. But now I've seen him inside.

Bishu

What was he like?

Nandini

Like a man from the epics,—his forehead like the gateway of a tower, his arms the iron bolts of some inaccessible fortress.

Bishu

What did you see when you went inside?

Nandini

A falcon was sitting on his left wrist. He put it on the perch and gazed at my face. Then, just as he had been stroking the falcon's wings, he began gently to stroke my hand. After a while he suddenly asked: "Don't you fear me, Nandini?"

"Not in the least," said I.

Then he buried his fingers in my unbound hair and sat long with closed eyes.

Bishu

How did you like it?

Nandini

I liked it. Shall I tell you how? It was as if he were a thousand-year-old banyan tree, and I a tiny little bird; when I lit on a branch of his and had my little swing, he needs must have felt a thrill of delight to his very marrow. I loved to give that bit of joy to that lonely soul.

Bishu

Then what did he say?

Nandini

Starting up and fixing his spear-point gaze on my face, he suddenly said: "I want to know you."

I felt a shiver run down my body and asked: "What is there to know? —I am not a manuscript!"

"I know all there is in manuscripts," said he, "but I don't know you." Then he became excited and cried: "Tell me all about Rañjan. Tell me how you love him."

I talked on: "I love Rañjan as the rudder in the water might love the sail in the sky, answering its rhythm of wind in the rhythm of waves."

He listened quietly, staring like a big greedy boy. All of a sudden he startled me by exclaiming: "Could you die for him?"

"This very moment," I replied.

"Never," he almost roared, as if in anger.

"Yes, I could," I repeated.

"What good would that do you?"

"I don't know," said I.

Then he writhed and shouted: "Go away from my room, go, go at once, don't disturb me in my work."

I could not understand what that meant.

Bishu

He gets angry when he can't understand.

Nandini

Bishu, don't you feel pity for him ?

Bishu

The day when God will be moved to pity for him, he will die.

Nandini

No, no, you don't know how desperately he wants to live.

Bishu

You will see this very day what his living means. I don't know whether you'll be able to bear the sight.

Nandini

There, look, there's a shadow. I

am sure the Governor has secretly heard what we've been saying.

Bishu

This place is dark with the Governor's shadow, it is everywhere. How do you like him?

Nandini

I have never seen anything so lifeless,—like a cane stick cut from the cane bush,—no leaves, no roots, no sap in the veins.

Bishu

Cut off from life, he spends himself in repressing life.

Nandini

Hush, he will hear you.

Bishu

He hears even when you are silent,

which is all the more dangerous. When I am with the diggers I am careful in my speech, so much so that the Governor thinks I'm the sorriest of the lot, and spares me out of sheer contempt. But, my mad girl, when I am with you my mind scorns to be cautious.

Nandini

No, no, you must not court danger. There comes the Governor.

(*The Governor comes in.*)

Governor

Hallo, 69 Ng! you seem to be making friends with everybody, without distinction.

Bishu

You may remember that I began by making friends even with you, only

it was the distinction that stood in the way.

Governor

Well, what are we discussing now?

Bishu

We are discussing how to escape from this fortress of yours.

Governor

Really? So recklessly, that you don't even mind confessing it?

Bishu

Sir Governor, it doesn't need much cleverness to know that when a captive bird pecks at the bars it's not in the spirit of caress. What does it matter whether that's openly confessed or not?

Governor

The captives' want of love we were

aware of, but their not fearing to admit it has become evident only recently.

Nandini

Won't you let Rañjan come?

Governor

You will see him this very day.

Nandini

I knew that; still, for your message of hope I wish you victory. Governor, take this garland of *kunda* flowers.

Governor

Why throw away the garland thus, and not keep it for Rañjan?

Nandini

There *is* a garland for him.

Governor

Aha, I thought so! I suppose it's

the one hanging round your neck. The garland of victory may be of *kunda* flowers, the gift of the hand; but the garland of welcome is of red oleanders, the gift of the heart. Well, let's be quick in accepting what comes from the hand, for that will fade; as for the heart's offering, the longer it waits the more precious it grows.

[*The Governor goes.*

Nandini (knocking at the window)

Do you hear? Let me come into your room.

Voice (from behind the scenes)

Why always the same futile request? Who is that with you? A pair to Rañjan?

Bishu

No, King, I am the obverse side of Rañjan, on which falls the shadow.

Voice

What use has Nandini for you?

Bishu

The use which music has for the hollow of the flute.

Voice

Nandini, what is this man to you?

Nandini

He's my partner in music. My heart soars in his voice, my pain cries in his tunes,—that's what he tells me.

(*Sings*)

"*I love, I love,"—'Tis the cry that*
breaks out
from the bosom of earth and water.

Voice

So that's your partner! What if

I dissolved your partnership this very minute?

Nandini

Why are you so cross? Haven't you any companion yourself?

Voice

Has the mid-day sun any companion?

Nandini

Well, let's change the subject. What's that? what's that in your hand?

Voice

A dead frog.

Nandini

What for?

Voice

Once upon a time this frog got into a hole in a stone, and in that shelter it existed for three thousand years.

I have learnt from it the secret of continuing to exist, but to live it does not know. To-day I felt bored and smashed its shelter. I've thus saved it from existing for ever. Isn't that good news?

Nandini

Your stone walls will also fall away from around me to-day,—I shall meet Rañjan.

Voice

I want to see you both together.

Nandini

You won't be able to see from behind your net.

Voice

I shall let you sit inside my room.

Nandini

What will you do with us?

Voice

Nothing, I only want to know you.

Nandini

When you talk of knowing, it frightens me.

Voice

Why?

Nandini

I feel that you have no patience with things that cannot be known, but can only be felt.

Voice

I dare not trust such things lest they should play me false. Now go away, don't waste my time.—No, no, wait a little. Give me that tassel of red oleanders which hangs from your hair.

Nandini

What will you do with it?

Voice

When I look at those flowers it seems to me as if the red light of my evil star has appeared in their shape. At times I want to snatch them from you and tear them to pieces. Again I think that if Nandini were ever to place that spray of flowers on my head, with her own hands, then——

Nandini

Then what ?

Voice

Then perhaps I might die in peace.

Nandini

Some one loves red oleanders and calls me by that name. It is in remembrance of him that I wear these flowers.

Voice

Then, I tell you, they're going to be *his* evil star as well as *mine*.

Nandini

Don't say such things, for shame! I am going.

Voice

Where?

Nandini

I shall go and sit near the gate of your fort.

Voice

Why?

Nandini

When Rañjan comes he'll see I am waiting for him.

Voice

I should like to tread hard on Rañjan and grind him in the dust.

Nandini

Why pretend to frighten me?

Voice

Pretend, you say? Don't you know I am really fearsome?

Nandini

You seem to take pleasure in seeing people frightened at you. In our village plays Srikantha takes the part of a demon; when he comes on the stage, he is delighted if the children are terrified. You are like him. Do you know what I think?

Voice

What is it?

Nandini

The people here trade on frightening others. That's why they have put

you behind a network and dressed you fantastically. Don't you feel ashamed to be got up like a bogey-man?

Voice

How dare you!

Nandini

Those whom you have scared all along will one day feel ashamed to be afraid. If my Rañjan were here, he would have snapped his fingers in your face, and not been afraid even if he died for it.

Voice

Your impudence is something great. I should like to stand you up on the top of a heap of everything I've smashed throughout my life. And then——

Nandini

Then what?

Voice

Then, like a squeezed bunch of grapes with its juice running out from between the gripping fingers, if I could but hold you tight with these two hands of mine,—and then—go, go, run away, at once, at once!

Nandini

If you shout at me so rudely, I'll stay on, do what you will!

Voice

I long savagely to prove to you how cruel I am. Have you never heard moans from inside my room?

Nandini

I have. Whose moaning was it?

Voice

The hidden mystery of life, wrenched

away by me, bewails its torn ties. To get fire from a tree you have to burn it. Nandini, there is fire within you too, red fire. One day I shall burn you and extract that also.

Nandini

Oh, you are cruel!

Voice

I must either gather or scatter. I can feel no pity for what I do not get. Breaking is a fierce kind of getting.

Nandini

But why thrust out your clenched fist like that?

Voice

Here, I take away my fist. Now fly, as the dove flies from the shadow of a hawk.

Nandini

Very well, I will go, and not vex you any more.

Voice

Here, listen, come back, Nandini!

Nandini

What is it?

Voice

On your face, there is the play of life in your eyes and lips; at the back of you flows your black hair, the silent fall of death. The other day when my hands sank into it they felt the soft calm of dying. I long to sleep with my face hidden inside those thick black clusters. You don't know how tired I am!

Nandini

Don't you ever sleep?

Voice

I feel afraid to sleep.

Nandini

Let me sing you the latest song that I've learnt.

(*Sings*)

"I love, I love" is the cry that breaks out
from the bosom of earth and water.
The sky broods like an aching heart,
the horizon is tender like eyes misted
with tears.

Voice

Enough! Enough! stop your singing!

Nandini

(*Sings on*)

A lament heaves and bursts
on the shore of the sea,
The whispers of forgotten days
are born in new leaves to die again.

See, Bishu, he has left the dead frog there and disappeared. He is afraid of songs.

Bishu

The old frog in his heart yearns to die when it hears singing, that's why he feels afraid. My mad girl, why is there a strange light on your face to-day, like the glow of a distant torch in the sky?

Nandini

News has reached me, Rañjan is coming to-day.

Bishu

How?

Nandini

Let me tell you. Every day a pair of blue-throats[1] come and sit on the pomegranate tree in front of my window. Every night, before I sleep,

[1] *Nilkantha*, a bird of good omen.

I salute the pole star and say: Sacred star of constancy, if a feather from the wings of the blue-throats finds its way into my room, then I will know my Rañjan is coming. This morning, as soon as I woke, I found a feather on my bed. See, here it is under my breast-cloth. When I meet him I shall put this feather on his crest.

Bishu

They say blue-throats' wings are an omen of victory.

Nandini

Rañjan's way to victory lies through my heart.

Bishu

No more of this; let me go to my work.

Nandini

I shan't let you work to-day.

Bishu

What must I do then?

Nandini

Sing that song of waiting.

Bishu

(*Sings*)

He who ever wants me through the ages,—
is it not he who sits to-day by my wayside?
I seem to remember a glimpse I had of his face,
in the twilight dusk of some ancient year.
Is it not he who sits to-day by the wayside?

Nandini

Bishu, when you sing I cannot help feeling that I owe you much, but have never given anything to you.

Bishu

I shall decorate my forehead with the mark of your never-giving, and go my way. No little-giving for me, in return for my song! Where will you go now?

Nandini

To the wayside by which Rañjan is coming.

[*They go.*

(*The Governor and a Headman come in.*)

Governor

No, we can't possibly allow Rañjan to enter this parish.

Headman

I put him to work in the tunnels of Vajragarh.

Governor

Well, what happened?

Headman

He said he was not used to being made to work. The Headman of Vajragarh came with the police, but the fellow doesn't know what fear is. Threaten him, he bursts out laughing. Asked why he laughs, he says solemnity is the mask of stupidity and he has come to take it off.

Governor

Did you set him to work with the diggers?

Headman

I did, I thought that pressure would make him yield. But on the contrary it seemed to lift the pressure from the diggers' minds also. He cheered them

up, and asked them to have a digger's dance!

Governor

Digger's dance! What on earth is that?

Headman

Rañjan started singing. Where were they to get drums?—they objected. Rañjan said, if there weren't any drums, there were spades enough. So they began keeping time with the spades, making a joke of their digging up of nuggets.

The Headman himself came over to reprimand them. "What style of work is this?" he thundered.

"I have unbound the work," said Rañjan. "It won't have to be dragged out by main force any more, it will run along of itself, dancing."

Governor

The fellow is mad, I see.

Headman

Hopelessly mad. "Use your spade properly," shouted I. "Much better give me a guitar," said he, smiling.

Governor

But how did he manage to escape from Vajragarh and come up here?

Headman

That I do not know. Nothing seems to fasten on to him. His boisterousness is infectious. The diggers are getting frisky.

Governor

Hallo, isn't that Rañjan himself,—going along the road, thrumming on an old guitar? Impudent rascal! He doesn't even care to hide.

Headman

Well, I never! Goodness alone knows how he broke through the wall!

Governor

Go and seize him instantly! He must not meet Nandini in this parish, for anything.

(*Enter Assistant Governor.*)

Where are you going?

Assistant Governor

To arrest Rañjan.

Governor

Where is the Deputy Governor?

Assistant Governor

He is so much amused by this fellow that he doesn't want to lay hands on him. He says the man's laugh shows

us what queer creatures we governors have grown into.

Governor

I have an idea. Don't arrest Rañjan. Send him on to the King's sanctum.

Assistant Governor

He refuses to obey our call, even in the King's name.

Governor

Tell him the King has made a slave-girl of his Nandini.

Assistant Governor

But if the King——

Governor

Don't you worry. Come on, I'll go with you myself.

[*They go.*

(*Enter Professor and Antiquarian.*)

Antiquarian

I say, what is this infernal noise going on inside?

Professor

The King, probably in a temper with himself, is engaged in breaking some of his own handiwork.

Antiquarian

It sounds like big pillars crashing down one after another.

Professor

There was a lake, at the foot of our hill over there, in which the waters of this Sankhini river used to gather. One day, suddenly, the rock to its left gave way, and the stored-up water rushed out laughing like mad. To see the King nowadays, it strikes me that his treasure lake has grown weary of its rock wall.

Antiquarian

What did you bring me here for, Professor ?

Professor

Latterly he has begun to get angry with my science. He says it only burgles through one wall to reveal another behind it, and never reaches the inner chamber of the Life spirit. I thought that, perhaps in the study of antiquity, he might explore the secret of Life's play. My knapsack has been rifled empty, now he can go on pocket-picking history.

Do you see who that is passing by ?

Antiquarian

A girl wearing a grass-green robe.

Professor

She has for her mantle the green joy of the earth. That is our Nandini.

In this Yaksha Town there are governors, foremen, headmen, tunnel-diggers, scholars like myself; there are policemen, executioners, and undertakers,—altogether a beautiful assortment! Only *she* is out of element. Midst the clamour of the market place she is a tuned-up lyre. There are days when the mesh of my studies is torn by the sudden breeze of her passing by, and through that rent my attention flies away *swish*, like a bird.

Antiquarian

Good heavens, man! Are even your well-seasoned bones subject to these poetic fits?

Professor

Life's attraction, like the tidal wave, tears away mind from its anchorage of books.

Antiquarian

Tell me, where am I to meet the King?

Professor

There's no means of meeting him. You'll have to talk to him from outside this network.

Antiquarian

We're to converse with this net between us?

Professor

Not the kind of whispered talk that may take place through a woman's veil, but solidly concentrated conversation. Even the cows in his stall don't dare to give milk, they yield their butter straight off!

Antiquarian

Admirable! To extract the essen-

tial from the diluted, is what scholars aim at.

Professor

But not what God in His creation aims at. He respects the fruit stones that are hard, but rejoices in the pulp that is sweet.

Antiquarian

Professor, I see that your grey science is galloping fast towards grass-green. But I wonder how you can stand this King of yours.

Professor

Shall I tell you the truth? I love him.

Antiquarian

You don't mean to say so?

Professor

He is so great that even what is

wrong with him will not be able to spoil him.

(*The Governor comes in.*)

Governor

I say, man of science, so this is the person you volunteered to bring here. Our King flew into a passion at the very mention of his special subject.

Antiquarian

May I ask why?

Governor

The King says there is no age of history which may be called old. It is always an eternal extension of the present.

Antiquarian

Can the front exist without the back?

Governor

What he said was: "Time proceeds

by revealing the new on his front; but the men of learning, suppressing that fact, will have it that Time ever carries the burden of the old on his back."

(*Nandini comes in hurriedly.*)

Nandini

What is happening? Who are they?

Governor

Hallo, Nandini, is that you? I shall wear your *kunda* chain late in the evening. When three-quarters of me can hardly be seen for the dark, then perchance a flower garland might become even me.

Nandini

Look over there—what a piteous sight! Who are those people, going along with the guards, filing out from the back door of the King's apartments?

Governor

We call them the King's leavings.

Nandini

What does that mean?

Governor

Some day you too will know its meaning; let it be for to-day.

Nandini

But are these men? Have they flesh and marrow, life and soul?

Governor

Maybe they haven't.

Nandini

Had they never any?

Governor

Maybe they had.

Nandini

Where then is it all gone now?

Governor

Man of science, explain it if you can, I'm off.

[*He goes.*

Nandini

Alas, alas! I see amongst these shadows faces that I know. Surely that is our Anup and Upamanyu?

Professor, they belong to our neighbouring village. Two brothers as tall as they were strong. They used to come and race their boats in our river on the fourteenth day of the moon in rainy June. Oh, who has brought them to this miserable plight?

See, there goes Shaklu,—in sword play he used to win the prize garland before all the others. Anu-up! Shaklu-u! look this way; it's I, your

Nandini, Nandin of Isháni, your very next village. They won't even raise their heads—heads lowered for ever!

Who is that? Surely, it is Kanku! Ah misery me! Even a boy like him has been chewed dry and thrown away a piece of sugar cane. He was a very shy lad. He would sit by the sloping side of the river landing where I used to go and fetch water, pretending he had come to gather reeds for making arrows. How often have I mischievously teased him. Kanku, look back at me! Alas, he whose blood would dance in his veins at a mere sign from me, now leaves my call unanswered.

Gone, gone, all the lights of our village are gone out! Professor, the steel is all eaten away, only the dark rust remains,—however did this happen?

Professor

Nandini, your notice happens to be

attracted towards the ashes, but turn your eyes towards the flame, and you will behold the brilliance of its writhing tongues.

Nandini

I don't follow you at all.

Professor

Well, you have seen the King, haven't you? I hear you were charmed by his appearance.

Nandini

Of course I was! Isn't he marvellous in his strength?

Professor

That marvellousness is the credit side of the account, and this ghastliness is the debit. These small ones are consumed to ash, that the great ones may leap up in flame. This is

the principle underlying all rise to greatness.

Nandini

It's a fiendish principle!

Professor

It's no use getting annoyed with a principle. Principles are neither good nor bad. That which happens *does* happen. To go against it, is to knock your head against the law of being.

Nandini

If this is the way of man's being, I refuse to *be*, I want to depart with those shadows,—show me the way.

Professor

When the time comes for showing us out, the great ones themselves will point the way. Before that, there's no such nuisance as a way at all!

You see how our Antiquarian has quietly slipped off, thinking he'll fly and save himself. After going a few steps, he'll soon discover that there's a wire network stretched from post to post, from country to country.

Nandini, I see, your temper is rising. The red oleanders against your flaming cheek are beginning to look like evening storm clouds gathering for a night of terror.

Nandini

(*Knocking at the net window*) Listen, listen!

Professor

Whom are you calling?

Nandini

That King of yours, shrouded in his mist of netting.

Professor

The door of the inner room has been closed. He won't hear you.

Nandini

(*Calling out*) Bishu, mad brother mine!

Professor

What d'you want with *him*?

Nandini

Why hasn't he come back yet? I feel afraid.

Professor

He was with you only a little while ago.

Nandini

The Governor said he was wanted to identify Rañjan. I tried to go with him, but they wouldn't let me. Whose groaning is that?

Professor

It must be that wrestler of ours.

Nandini

What wrestler?

Professor

The world-famous Gajju, whose brother, Bhajan, had the bravado to challenge the King to a wrestling match, since when not even a thread of his loin cloth is anywhere to be seen. That put Gajju on his mettle, and he came on with great sound and fury. I told him at the outset that, if he wanted to dig in the tunnels underneath this kingdom, he was welcome,—he could at least drag on a dead and alive existence for some time. But if he wanted to make a show of heroics, that would not be tolerated for a moment.

Nandini

Does it at all make for their well-being thus to keep watch and ward over these man-traps night and day ?

Professor

Well-being! There's no question of "well" in it at all,—only "being." That *being* of theirs has expanded so terribly that, unless millions of men are pressed into service, who's going to support its weight? So the net is spreading farther and farther. They must exist, you see.

Nandini

Must they? If it is necessary to die in order to live like men, what harm in dying?

Professor

Again that anger, the wild cry of red oleander? It is sweet, no doubt, yet what is true is true. If it gives you pleasure to say that one must die to live, well, say so by all means; but those who say that others must die

that they themselves may live,—it's only they who are actually alive. You may cry out that this shows a lack of humanity, but you forget, in your indignation, that this is what humanity itself happens to be. The tiger does not feed on the tiger, it's only man who fattens on his fellow-man.

(*The Wrestler totters in.*)

Nandini

Oh poor thing, see how he comes, staggering. Wrestler, lie down here. Professor, do see where he's hurt.

Professor

You won't see any outward sign of a wound.

Wrestler

All-merciful God, grant me strength once more in my life, if only for one little day!

Professor

Why, my dear fellow?

Wrestler

Just to wring that Governor's neck!

Professor

What has the Governor done to you?

Wrestler

It's he who brought about the whole thing. I never wanted to fight. Now, after egging me on, he goes about saying it's my fault.

Professor

Why, what interest had he in your fighting?

Wrestler

They only feel safe when they rob the whole world of strength. Lord of Mercy, grant that I may be able to

gouge his eyes out some day, to tear asunder his lying tongue!

Nandini

How do you feel now. Wrestler?

Wrestler

Altogether hollowed out! These demons know the magic art of sucking away not only strength but hope.

If only once I could somehow,—O good God, but once,—everything is possible to Thy mercy,—if only I could fasten my teeth for once in the Governor's throat!

Nandini

Professor, help me to raise him.

Professor

That would be a crime, Nandini, according to the custom of this land.

Nandini

Wouldn't it be a crime to let the man perish ?

Professor

That which there is none to punish may be a sin, but never a crime. Nandini, come away, come right away out of this. The tree spreads its root-fingers and does its grabbing underground, but there it does not bring forth its flowers. Flowers bloom on the branches which reach towards the light. My sweet Red Oleander, don't try to probe our secrets in the depths of their dust. Be for us swaying in the air above, that we may gaze upwards to see you.

There comes the Governor. He hates to see me talk to you. So I must go.

Nandini

Why is he so dead against me ?

Professor

I can guess. You have touched his heart-strings. The longer it takes to tune them up, the more awful the discord meanwhile.

(*The Professor goes, the Governor comes in.*)

Nandini

Sir Governor!

Governor

Nandini, when our Gosain saw that *kunda* garland of yours in my room, both his eyes,—but here he comes——

(*The Gosain comes in.*)

Your Holiness, accept my reverence. That garland was given to me by our Nandini here.

Gosain

Ah indeed! the gift of a pure heart! God's own white *kunda* flowers! Their beauty remains unsullied even in the hands of a man of the world. This is what gives one faith in the power of virtue, and hope for the sinners' redemption.

Nandini

Please do something for this man, Your Reverence. There's very little life left in him.

Gosain

The Governor is sure to keep him as much alive as it is necessary for him to be. But, my child, these discussions ill become your lips.

Nandini

So in this kingdom you follow some calculation in apportioning life?

Gosain

Of course,—for mortal life has its limits. Our class of people have their great burden to bear, therefore we have to claim a larger portion of life's sustenance for our share. That's according to Almighty God's own decree.

Nandini

Reverend Sir, may I know what good God has so heavily charged you to do to these people?

Gosain

The life that is unlimited gives no provocation to fight for its distribution. We Preachers have the charge of turning these people towards this unlimited life. So long as they remain content with that, we are their friends.

Nandini

Then will this man with his very limited life have to remain lying here half dead?

Gosain

Why should he remain lying down anyway? What say you, Governor?

Governor

Quite right. Why should we let him lie? From now he won't need to walk by his own strength alone, we shall carry him along with ours.

Here, Gajju!

Wrestler

Yes, Sir Governor!

Gosain

Good Lord, his voice has already become ever so much reedier. It strikes me we shall be able to make him join our choir of the Holy Name.

Governor

Gajju!

Wrestler

At your service, Sir!

Governor

Report yourself at the Headman's quarters, parish Y-Z.

Nandini

How can the poor man possibly walk?

Governor

Look here, Nandini, it is our business to drive men. With the right kind of push a man can be made to go a good distance, even when he is at the point of collapse.

Get along with you, Gajju!

Wrestler

As you command, Sir!

Nandini

Let me come over to the Headman's quarters to help you.

Wrestler

No. Don't add to my troubles, I beg of you.

[*The Wrestler goes.*

Nandini

Governor, stay, tell me, whither have you taken my Bishu ?

Governor

Who am I that I should take him ? The wind carries off the clouds,—if you think that to be a crime, make enquiries as to who is behind the wind.

Nandini

Dear me, what an awful place ! You are not men, and those you drive

are not men, either,—you are winds and they are clouds !

Reverend Gosain, I am sure, *you* know where my Bishu is.

Gosain

I know, for sure, that wherever he is, it's for the best.

Nandini

For whose best ?

Gosain

That you won't understand—

Oh, I say, leave off, let go of that, it's my rosary.—Hallo, Governor, what wild girl is this you have——

Governor

The girl has somehow managed to ensconce herself in a niche, safe from the laws of this land, and we can't lay hands on her. Our King himself——

Gosain

Good heavens, now she'll tear off my wrap of the Holy Name too. What unspeakable outrage!

[*The Gosain flies.*

Nandini

Governor, you *must* tell me where you have taken Bishu.

Governor

They have summoned him to the court of judgement. That's all that there is to tell you. Let me go.

Nandini

Because I am a woman, you are not afraid of me? God sends His thunderbolt through His messenger, the lightning spark—that bolt I have borne here with me; it will shatter the golden spire of your mastery.

Governor

Then let me tell you the truth before I go. It's you who have dragged Bishu into danger.

Nandini

I?

Governor

Yes, you! He was so long content to be quietly burrowing away underground like a worm. It's you who taught him to spread the wings of death. O fire of the gods, you'll yet draw forth many more to their fate.—Then at length will you and I come to our understanding, and that won't be long.

Nandini

So may it be. But tell me one thing before you go. Will you not let Rañjan come and see me?

Governor

No, never.

Nandini

Never, you say! I defy you to do your worst. This very day I am sure, absolutely sure, that he and I will meet!

[*Governor goes.*

(*Knocking and tugging at the network*) Listen, listen, King! Where's your court of judgement? Open its door to me.

(*Kishôr comes in.*)

Who is that? My boy, Kishôr! Do you know where Bishu is?

Kishôr

Yes, Nandini, be ready to see him. I don't know how it was, the Chief of the Guard took a fancy to my youthfulness and yielded to my en-

treaties. He has consented to take him along by this path.

Nandini

Guard! Take him along? Is he then——

Kishôr

Yes, here they come.

Nandini

What! Handcuffs on your wrists? Friend of my heart, where are they taking you like that?

(*Bishu comes in under arrest.*)

Bishu

It's nothing to be anxious about!—Guards, please wait a little, let me say a few words to her.—My wild girl, my heart's joy, at last I am free.

Nandini

What do you mean, Singer of my

heart? I don't understand your words.

Bishu

When I used to be afraid, and try to avoid danger at every step, I seemed to be at liberty; but that liberty was the worst form of bondage.

Nandini

What offence have you committed that they should take you away thus?

Bishu

I spoke out the truth to-day, at last.

Nandini

What if you did?

Bishu

No harm at all!

Nandini

Then why did they bind you like this?

Bishu

What harm in that either? These chains will bear witness to the truth of my freedom.

Nandini

Don't they feel ashamed of themselves to lead you along the road chained like a beast? Aren't they men too?

Bishu

They have a big beast inside them, that's why their heads are not lowered by the indignity of man, rather the inner brute's tail swells and wags with pride at man's downfall.

Nandini

O dear heart! Have they been hurting you? What are these marks on your body?

Bishu

They have whipped me, with the whips they use for their dogs. The string of that whip is made with the same thread which goes to the stringing of their Gosain's rosary. When they tell their beads they don't remember that; but probably their God is aware of it.

Nandini

Let them bind me like that too, and take me away with you, my heart's Joy! Unless I share some of your punishment I shan't be able to touch food from to-day.

Kishôr

I'm sure I can persuade them to take me in exchange for you. Let me take your place, Bishu.

Bishu

Don't be silly!

Kishôr

Punishment won't hurt me. I am young. I shall bear it with joy.

Nandini

No, no, do not talk like that.

Kishôr

Nandini, my absence has been noticed, their bloodhounds are after me. Allow me to escape the indignity awaiting me by taking shelter in a punishment I joyfully accept.

Bishu

No, it won't do for you to be caught —not for a while yet. There's work for you, dear boy, and dangerous work too. Rañjan has come. You must find him out.

Kishôr

Then I bid you farewell, Nandini. What is your message when I meet Rañjan?

Nandini

This tassel of red oleanders (*hands it to him*).

[*Kishôr goes.*

Bishu

May you both be united once again.

Nandini

That union will give me no pleasure now. I shall never be able to forget that I sent you away empty-handed. And what has that poor boy, Kishôr, got from me?

Bishu

All the treasure hidden in his heart has been revealed to him by the fire you have lighted in his life. Nandini, I remind you, it's for you to put that

blue-throat's feather on Rañjan's crest. —There, do you hear them singing the harvest song ?

Nandini

I do, and it wrings my heart, to tears.

Bishu

The play of the fields is ended now, and the field-master is taking the ripe corn home. Come on, Guards, let's not linger any more.

(*Sings*)

Mow the corn of the last harvest,
bind it in sheaves.
The remainder, let it return
as dust unto the dust.

[*They go.*

(*The Governor and a Doctor come in.*)

Doctor

I've seen him. I find the King

dissatisfied with himself. That's a disease, not of the body, but of the mind.

Governor

What's the remedy?

Doctor

A big shock. Try and get up a big row, either with some other king, or amongst the people themselves!

Governor

In other words, unless he is allowed to harm some one else, he will harm himself?

Doctor

These big men are big babies. They must have plenty of play. When they get tired of one game, if you don't supply them with another, they'll break their toys. But be prepared, Governor, there isn't much time to lose.

Governor

I've read the signs long ago, and completed all arrangements. But what a pity! Just when our golden city has amassed wealth such as it never had before, to have to—never mind, you may go—I'll think it over.

[*Doctor goes.*

(*A Headman comes in.*)

Headman

Did Your Lordship send for me? I am the Headman of Parish J.

Governor

You are No. 321, aren't you?

Headman

Marvellous! Your Lordship remembers even my unworthy self!

Governor

My wife will be driving out to-day. The post will be changed near your village, and you must see that she's not detained.

Headman

There's a plague on the cattle of our parish, and not a single ox can be had to draw the car. Never mind, we can press the diggers into service.

Governor

You know where you have to take her? To the garden-house, where the feast of the Flag-worship is to be held.

Headman

I'll see to it at once, but let me tell you one thing before I go. That 69 Ng, whom they call mad Bishu,—it's high time to cure his madness.

Governor

Why, how does he annoy you?

Headman

Not so much by what he says or does, as by what he implies.

Governor

There's no need to worry about him any further. You understand!

Headman

Really! That's good news, indeed! Another thing. That 47 V, he's rather too friendly with 69 Ng.

Governor

I have observed that.

Headman

Your Lordship's observation is ever keen. Only, as you have to keep an

eye on so many things, one or two may perchance escape your notice. For instance, there's our No. 95, a distant connection of mine by marriage, ever ready to make sandals for the feet of Your Lordship's sweeper out of his own ribs,—so irrepressibly loyal is he that even his wife hangs her head for very shame,—and yet up to now——

Governor

His name has been entered in the High Register.

Headman

Ah, then his lifelong service will at last receive its reward! The news must be broken to him gently, because he gets epileptic fits, and supposing suddenly——

Governor

All right, we'll see to that. Now be off, there's no time.

Headman

Just a word about another person,—though he's my own brother-in-law. When his mother died, my wife brought him up with her own hands; yet for my master's sake——

Governor

You can tell me about him another time. Run away now.

Headman

There comes His Honour the Deputy Governor. Please speak a word to him on my behalf. He doesn't look upon me with favour. I suspect that when 69 Ng used to enjoy the favour of free entry into the palace, he must have been saying things against me.

Governor

I assure you, he never even mentioned your name.

Headman

That's just his cleverness! What can be more damaging than to suppress the name of a man, whose name is his best asset? These schemers have their different ways. No. 33 of our parish has an incurable habit of haunting Your Lordship's private chamber. One is always afraid of his inventing goodness knows what calumnies about other people. And yet if one knew the truth about his own——

Governor

There's positively no time to-day. Get away with you, quick!

Headman

I make my salute.

(*Coming back*) Just one word more lest I forget. No. 88 of our neighbouring parish started work on a

miserable pittance, and before two years are out his income has run into thousands, not to speak of extras! Your Lordship's mind is like that of the gods—a few words of hypocritical praise are enough to draw down the best of your boons.

Governor

All right, all right,—that can keep for to-morrow.

Headman

I'm not so mean as to suggest taking away the bread from his mouth. But Your Lordship should seriously consider whether it's wise to keep him on at the Treasury. Our Vishnu Dutt knows him inside out. If you send——

Governor

I shall send for him this very day. But begone,—not another word!

Headman

Your Lordship, my third son is getting to be quite a big boy. He came the other day to prostrate himself at your feet. After two days of dancing attendance outside, he had to go away without gaining admission to you. He feels it very bitterly. My daughter-in-law has made with her own hands an offering of sweet pumpkin for Your Lordship——

Governor

Oh confound you! Tell him to come day after to-morrow, he will be admitted. *Now, will you*——

(Headman goes. The Deputy Governor comes in.)

Deputy Governor

I've just sent on the dancing girls and musicians to the garden.

Governor

And that little matter about Rañjan, —how far——?

Deputy Governor

That kind of work is not in my line. The Assistant Governor has taken it upon himself to do the job. By this time his——

Governor

Does the King——?

Deputy Governor

The King can't possibly have understood. Some lie told by our men has goaded Rañjan to frenzy, and he's rushing to the usual fate of—— I detest the whole business. Moreover, I don't think it right to deceive the King like this.

Governor

That responsibility is mine. Now then, that girl must be——

Deputy Governor

Don't talk of all that to me. The Headman who has been put on duty is the right man,—he doesn't stick at any dirtiness whatever.

Governor

Does that man Gosain know about this affair ?

Deputy Governor

I'm sure he can guess, but he's careful not to know for certain.

Governor

What's his object ?

Deputy Governor

For fear of there being no way left open for saying: "I don't believe it."

Governor

But what makes him take all this trouble?

Deputy Governor

Don't you see? The poor man is really two in one, clumsily joined,—Priest on the skin, Governor at the marrow. He has to take precious care to prevent the Governor part of him coming up to the surface, lest it should clash too much with his telling of beads.

Governor

He might have dropped the beads altogether.

Deputy Governor

No, for whatever his blood may be,

his mind, in a sense, is really pious. If only he can tell his beads in his temple, and revel in slave-driving in his dreams, he feels happy. But for him, the true complexion of our God would appear too black. In fact, Gosain is placed here only to help our God to feel comfortable.

Governor

My friend, I see the instinct of the Ruler doesn't seem to match with the colour of your own blood, either!

Deputy Governor

There's hope still. Human blood is fast drying up. But I can't stomach your No. 321 yet. When I'm obliged to embrace him in public, no holy water seems able to wash out the impurity of his touch.

Here comes Nandini.

Governor

Come away, I don't trust you. I know the spell of Nandini has fallen on your eyes.

Deputy Governor

I know that as well as you do. But you don't seem to know that a tinge of her oleanders has got mixed with the colour of duty in *your* eyes too—that's what makes them so frightfully red.

Governor

That may be. Fortunately for us, our mind knows not its own secret. Come away. [*They go.*

(*Nandini comes in.*)

Nandini

(*Knocking and pushing at the net-work*) Listen, listen, listen!

(*The Gosain comes in.*)

Gosain

Whom are you prodding like that?

Nandini

That boa-constrictor of yours, who remains in hiding and swallows men.

Gosain

Lord, lord! When Providence wishes to destroy the small, it does so by putting big words into their little mouths.

See here, Nandini, believe me when I tell you that I aim at your welfare.

Nandini

Try some more real method of doing me good.

Gosain

Come to my sanctuary, let me chant you the Holy Name for a while.

Nandini

What have I to do with the name?

Gosain

You will gain peace of mind.

Nandini

Shame, shame on me if I do! I shall sit and wait here at the door.

Gosain

You have more faith in men than in God?

Nandini

Your God of the Flagstaff,—he will never unbend. But the man who is lost to sight behind the netting, will he also remain bound in his network for ever? Go, go. It's your trade to delude men with words, after filching away their lives.

[*The Gosain goes.*

(*Enter Phágulal and Chandrá.*)

Phágulal

Our Bishu came away with you, where is he now? Tell us the truth.

Nandini

He has been made prisoner and taken away.

Chandrá

You witch, you must have given information against him. You are their spy.

Nandini

You don't really believe that!

Chandrá

What else are you doing here?

Phágulal

Every person suspects every other person in this cursed place. Yet I have always trusted you, Nandini.

In my heart I used to—— However, let that pass. But to-day it looks very very strange, I must say.

Nandini

Perhaps it does. It may really be even as you say. Bishu has got into trouble for coming with me. He used to be quite safe in your company, he said so himself.

Chandrá

They why did you decoy him away, you evil-omened creature?

Nandini

Because he said he wanted to be free.

Chandrá

A precious kind of freedom you have given him!

Nandini

I could not understand all that he said, Chandrá. Why did he tell me that freedom could only be found by plunging down to the bottom of danger?—Phágulal, how could I save him who wanted to be free from the tyranny of safety?

Chandrá

We don't understand all this. If you can't bring him back, you'll have to pay for it. I'm not to be taken in by that coquettish prettiness of yours.

Phágulal

What's the use of idle bickering? Let's gather a big crowd from the workmen's lines, and then go and smash the prison gate.

Nandini

I'll come with you.

Phágulal

What for ?

Nandini

To join in the breaking.

Chandrá

As if you haven't done quite enough breaking already, you sorceress !

(Gôkul comes in.)

Gokul

That witch must be burnt alive, before everything else.

Chandrá

That won't be punishment enough. First knock off that beauty of hers, with which she goes about ruining people. Weed it out of her face as as the grass is weeded with a hoe.

Gôkul

That I can do. Let this hammer just have a dance on her nose tip——

Phágulal

Beware! If you dare touch her——

Nandini

Stop, Phágulal. He's a coward; he wants to strike me because he's afraid of me. I don't fear his blows one bit.

Gôkul

Phágulal, you haven't come to your senses yet. You think the Governor alone is your enemy. Well, I admire a straightforward enemy. But that sweet-mouthed beauty of yours——

Nandini

Ah, so you too admire the Governor, as the mud beneath his feet admires the soles of his shoes!

Phágulal

Gôkul, the time has at length come to show your prowess, but not by fighting a girl. Come along with me. I'll show you what to fight.

[*Phágulal, Chandrá, and Gôkul go.*

(*A band of men come in.*)

Nandini

Where are you going, my good men?

First man

We carry the offering for the Flag-worship.

Nandini

Have you seen Rañjan?

Second man

I saw him once, five days ago, but not since. Ask those others who follow us.

Nandini

Who are they ?

Third man

They are bearing wine for the Governors' feast.

(*The first batch goes, another comes in.*)

Nandini

Look here, red-caps, have you seen Rañjan ?

First man

I saw him the other day at the house of Headman Sambhu.

Nandini

Where is he now ?

Second man

D'you see those men taking the ladies' dresses for the feast ? Ask

them. They hear a lot of things that don't reach our ears.

(*Second batch go, a third come in.*)

Nandini

Do *you* know, my men, where they have kept Rañjan?

First man

Hush, hush!

Nandini

I am sure you know. You *must* tell me.

Second man

What enters by our ears doesn't come out by our mouths, that's why we are still alive. Ask one of the men who are carrying the weapons.

(*They go, others come in.*)

Nandini

Oh do stop a moment and listen to me. Tell me, where is Rañjan?

First man

The auspicious hour draws near. It's time for the King himself to come for the Flag-worship. Ask him about it when he steps out. We only know the beginning, not the end.

[*They go.*

Nandini (shaking the network violently)

Open the door. The time has come.

Voice (behind the scenes)

But not for you. Go away from here.

Nandini

You must hear *now* what I have to say. It cannot wait for another time.

Voice

You want Rañjan, I know. I have asked the Governor to fetch him at once. But don't remain standing at the door when I come out for the worship, for then you'll run great risk.

Nandini

I have cast away all fear. You can't drive me away. Happen what may, I'm not going to move till your door is opened.

Voice

To-day's for the Flag-worship. Don't distract my mind. Get away from my door.

Nandini

The gods have all eternity for their worship, they're not pressed for time. But the sorrows of men cannot wait

to reach other men, they have so very little time.

Voice

I am tired, very tired. I go to the Flag-worship to revive my drooping spirit. Don't unnerve me.

Nandini

Pass over my body if you will, I shan't move.

Voice

Nandini, too much have I indulged you, so that you no longer fear me. But to-day you *shall* be afraid!

Nandini

I dare you to frighten me, as you do the rest. I scorn your indulgence!

Voice

Do you indeed! Then I shall shatter your pride to-day. The time has come for me to reveal myself to you.

Nandini

I await that revelation. Open your door.

(*The door opens, the King appears.*)

Oh who is that,—lying on the floor,—is it not Rañjan himself?

King

What did you say? Rañjan! How can that possibly be?

Nandini

Yes, this is indeed my Rañjan.

King

Then why did he not give his name? Why did he fling me his challenge?

Nandini

Wake, Rañjan, it is I, your Red Oleander! King, why does he not wake?

King

Deceived! These traitors have deceived me,—perdition take them! My own machine refuses my sway! Call the Governor—bring him to me handcuffed——

Nandini

King, they all say you know magic. Make him wake up for my sake.

King

My magic can only put an end to waking.—Alas! I know not how to awaken.

Nandini

Then lull me to sleep,—the same sleep! Oh, why did you work this havoc? I cannot bear it any more.

King

I have killed youth. Yes, I have indeed killed youth,—all these years,

with all my strength. The curse of youth, dead, is upon me.

Nandini

Did he not take my name?

King

He did,—in such a way that every vein in my body was set on fire.

Nandini (to Rañjan)

My love, my brave one, here do I place this blue-throat's feather in your crest. Your victory has begun from to-day, and I am its bearer. Ah, here is that tassel of my flowers in his hand. Then Kishôr must have met him——

But where is he? King, where is that boy?

King

Which boy?

Nandini

The boy who brought these flowers to Rañjan.

King

That absurd little child! He came to defy me with his girlish face.

Nandini

And then? Tell me! Quick!

King

He burst himself against me, like a bubble.

Nandini

King, the Time is indeed now come!

King

Time for what?

Nandini

For the last fight between you and me.

King

But I can kill you in no time,—this instant.

Nandini

From that very instant that death of mine will go on killing you every single moment.

King

Be brave, Nandini, trust me. Make me your comrade to-day.

Nandini

What would you have me do?

King

To fight against me, but with your hand in mine. That fight has already begun. There is my flag. First I break the Flagstaff,—thus! Next it's for you to tear its banner. Let your hand unite with mine to kill me,

utterly kill me. That will be my emancipation.

Guards (rushing up)

What are you doing, King? You dare break the Flagstaff, the holiest symbol of our divinity? The Flagstaff which has its one point piercing the heart of the earth and the other that of heaven! What a terrible sin, —on the very day of the Flag-worship! Comrades, let us go and inform our Governors.

[*They run off.*

King

A great deal of breaking remains to be done. You will come with me, Nandini?

Nandini

I will.

(*Phágulal comes in.*)

Phágulal

They won't hear of letting Bishu off. I am afraid, they'll—— Who is this? The King!

Oh you wicked witch,—conspiring with the King himself! O vile deceiver!

King

What is the matter with you? What is that crowd out for?

Phágulal

To break the prison gate. We may lose our lives, but we shan't fall back.

King

Why should you fall back? I too am out for breaking. Behold the first sign—my broken Flagstaff!

Phágulal

What! This is altogether beyond us simple folk.

Be merciful, Nandini, don't deceive me. Am I to believe my eyes?

Nandini

Brother, you have set out to win death. You have left no chance for deception to touch you.

Phágulal

You too come along with us, our own Nandini!

Nandini

That is what I'm still alive for, Phágulal. I wanted to bring my Rañjan amongst you. Look there, he has come, my hero, braving death!

Phágulal

Oh, horror! Is that Rañjan lying there, silent?

Nandini

Not silent. He leaves behind him

in death his conquering call. He will live again, he cannot die.

Phágulal

Ah, my Nandini, my beautiful one, was it for this you were waiting all these eager days?

Nandini

I *did* await his coming, and he *did* come. I still wait to prepare for his coming again, and he *shall* come again. Where is Chandrá?

Phágulal

She has gone with her tears and prayers to the Governor, accompanied by Gôkul. I'm afraid Gôkul is seeking to take up service with the Governor. He will betray us.

King, are you sure you don't mistake us? We are out to break your own prison, I tell you!

King

Yes, it is my *own* prison. You and I must work together, for you cannot break it alone.

Phágulal

As soon as the Governor hears of it, he will march with all his forces to prevent us.

King

Yes, my fight is against them.

Phágulal

But the soldiers will not obey you.

King

You will be on my side!

Phágulal

Shall we be able to win through?

King

We shall at least be able to die! At last I have found the meaning of death. I am saved!

Phágulal

King, do you hear the tumult?

King

There comes the Governor with his troops. How could he be so quick about it? He must have been prepared beforehand. They have used my own power against me.

Phágulal

My men have not yet turned up.

King

They will never come. The Governor is sure to get round them.

Nandini

I had my last hope that they would bring my Bishu to me. Will that never be ?

King

No hope of that, I'm afraid.

Phágulal

Then come along, Nandini, let us take you to a safe place first. The Governor will see red, if he but catches sight of you.

Nandini

You want to banish me into the solitary exile of safety ?

(*Calling out*) Governor! Governor! —He has swung up my garland of *kunda* flowers on his spear-head. I will dye that garland the colour of my oleanders with my heart's blood.—

Governor! He has seen me! Victory to Rañjan!

[*Runs off.*

King (*calling after her*)

Nandini!

[*Follows her.*

(*The Professor comes in.*)

Phágulal

Where are *you* hurrying to, Professor?

Professor

Some one said that the King has at last had tidings of the secret of Life, and has gone off in quest of it. I have thrown away my books to follow him.

Phágulal

The King has just gone off to

N

his death. He has heard Nandini's call.

Professor

The network is torn to shreds! Where is Nandini?

Phágulal

She has gone before them all. We can't reach her any more.

Professor

It is only now that we shall reach her. She won't evade us any longer.

(*Professor rushes out, Bishu comes in.*)

Bishu

Phágulal, where is Nandini?

Phágulal

How did you get here?

Bishu

Our workmen have broken into the prison. There they are,—running off to fight. I came to look for Nandini. Where is she?

Phágulal

She has gone in advance of us all.

Bishu

Where?

Phágulal

To the last freedom.
Bishu, do you see who is lying there?

Bishu

Rañjan!

Phágulal

You see the red streak?

Bishu

I understand,—their red marriage tie!

Phágulal

They are united.

Bishu

Now it is for me to take my last lonely journey.—Perhaps we may meet. —Perhaps she may want me to sing.— My mad girl, O my mad girl !—

Come, brother, on to the fight !

Phágulal

To the fight ! Victory to Nandini !

Bishu

Victory to Nandini !

Phágulal

Here is her wristlet of red oleanders. She has bared her arm to-day,—and left us.

Bishu

Once I told her I would not take

anything from her hand. I break my word and take this. Come along!

[*They go.*

(*Song in the distance.*)

Hark 'tis Autumn calling,—
Come, O come away!
The earth's mantle of dust is filled with ripe corn!
O the joy! the joy!

CURTAIN